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Think about Tables with Dale Dufer

By Pat Eby
May 19, 2015 9:00 AM

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PHOTOS BY PAT EBY



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The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis:
Disgraced

Tables are useful things, ordinary objects we live with every day, solid and dependable. The wildly organic tables now on display at Stone Spiral Gallery in Maplewood made by artist and woodworker Dale Dufer are practical, too, but with twists, turns and surprises.

When Dufer removed the invasive bush honeysuckle thickets that threatened the native plants and animals in his lush Maplewood backyard, he stacked the cut branches on the ground. "What started out as a clearing-out project changed," he says. "I've worked with wood for 40 years. I thought I would use the wood as pickets for a rustic fence, but then I noticed the structure of the wood. I realized the branches could be made into a stable base. Attach a top and you've got a table."

Dufer acted on his hunch. He made tables and gifted friends with his first efforts. "The response was encouraging," he says. "Last year I had a booth at the Green Homes Festival with the tables. Everybody liked them."

Mature bush honeysuckle branches sometimes curve and bend. They split into forks and deep crotches, irregular in form. Bush honeysuckle is no supple vine, but a woody bush with far-reaching branches that create deep cover to crowd out native plants. The trunk and branches vary in size and shape; some thick as a baby's chubby legs, others slender and curvilinear. Dufer maximizes the unusual character of the wood into his table designs.

His idiosyncratic tables exhibit a kinship with tramp wicker and with the organic midcentury designs made from driftwood. His choice of graceful, curved shapes in some tables references Art Nouveau and the bentwood furniture of that era.

Dufer's artistry shines in his selections of branches, in his choice of tabletops polished or rustic and in the contrast of shapes and finishes from base to table surface. "The tabletops are often re-purposed," Dufer says. "I love working with the bases, with the fluid shapes. Tops can get tedious. I have so much experience in furniture making I sometimes go over the top with the finishes."

The beauty of a table is often in the finish, in the soft gleam of the top; in the feel when hands brush the surface. Dufer sometimes mixes his own stains and varnishes, repurposing old material, wasting nothing. The sheer, deep sweep of blues from robin's egg to royal that reveals the beauty of the poplar on *Blue Top* demonstrates his skill. The midcentury modernist shape of his *Three Tier* table shows his artistry. The base, stripped of bark and creamy white, balances three striking cinnamon-color fir tops. Each table in the show exhibits sensitivity in Dufer's match of materials and finishes.

Dufer isn't content to simply make objects, however. He wants to deliver a message. He holds workshops to teach people how to make the tables. "The tables are the draw. A person sees these tables and we have an opportunity to talk about bush honeysuckle, the worst invasive species in Missouri," he says.

"At a workshop, people get outside. That's a plus. They're doing something, which is getting rid of bush honeysuckle. We are creating a family of table makers," he says. "Every single table is just plain old fun," he says. "The whole process is satisfying. Finding the right pieces, getting rid of an invasive plant - the whole *Gestalt*."

Dale Dufer made something beautiful out of something ugly. He created useful things from something destructive. He's educated people through *Woodworms*, the website he and his wife Jean Ponzi maintain to keep people up to date on their work. As he talks about tables, this committed environmentalist and educator tells a story that's hard to hear through the objects he creates. Think about tables.

Show: Think About Tables

Artist: Dale Dufer

Where: Stone Spiral Gallery; 2506 Sutton Avenue; Maplewood, MO

Dates and Times: through May 30, 2015; Wednesdays 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.; Saturdays 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. or by appointment, 314-477-6292, thinkabouttables@earthlink.net, woodworms.net

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Feb 6, 2016 - Mar 26, 2016

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Think About Tables

Brilliant writing once again, Pat Eby. I bought a table from Dale today and he said how pleased he was with how this article turned out. Both of you practice your crafts at such a high level it's a pleasure to know you. Mike Holdinghaus 272 days ago | reply

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